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The Expulsion of Sex Workers From Vancouver's West End, 1975-1985: A Cautionary Tale

Long reputed to be the “prostitution capital of Canada,” Vancouver, B.C. has been at the centre of legal and political debate, policing, media analysis, and policy-making for more than a century. Most recently, international news stories have focused on the disappearance and murder of 70 sex workers in the city, and the trial of accused serial killer Robert (Willie) Pickton. Criminologist John Lowman argues that these brutal murders date back to the mid-1970s when the city’s prostitutes were forced out of relatively safe hotels and nightclubs onto more and more dangerous streets. From 1975 to 1985 - arguably *the* most pivotal yet under-studied decade in the regulation of outdoor prostitution in Vancouver’s history - a heterogeneous community of male, female, and transgender prostitutes lived and worked on-and-around Davie Street in the city’s West End. Their presence sparked a vigorous backlash, including vigilante action, from multiple stake-holders intent on transforming the port town into a “world class city” and venerable host of Expo 1986. In this paper, I examine the abolitionist strategies adopted by Vancouver’s residents’ groups, women’s organizations, business owners, city politicians, provincial legislators, and police to criminalize street solicitation and purge prostitutes from the West End. As well, I analyze the role played by mainstream media in fuelling a “discourse of disposal” to justify the expulsion of “throwaways.” Historicizing and contextualizing the erasure of this violent relocation from popular memory, and from the physical spaces of the West End, will shed light on the socio-legal, spatial, and ideological conditions that coalesced more than two decades ago to normalize the “whore stigma” and the collective disavowal of independent sex workers as citizens.